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ABSTRACT

This study used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to analyze critical issues affecting the preparation and diversity of the postsecondary applicant pool. Participants were 14,914 respondents, including 1,685 African Americans, who completed all four waves of the NELS. Overall, about two-thirds of all students expected to earn at least a college degree, and just over 10 percent expected no education beyond high school. There was a gap between the education expectations of African American students and their postsecondary participation 2 years past high school. Although 88 percent expected to attend college or earn a college or advanced degree, only 56 percent were moving toward that goal. Significantly more white students than black students were in the process of moving toward that goal. School experiences differed by race. In schools attended by African Americans, fewer students were on a college preparatory track or took advanced placement courses, and the college-going rates were lower than those in predominantly white high schools. Three of five school relationship characteristics positively impacted African American students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation: school personnel expectations, teachers talking with students, and school extracurricular participation. Students (primarily white) who formed good school relationships had higher educational expectations and postsecondary participation. (Contains 40 bibliographic references.) (SM)

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School Relationships Foster Success for African American Students

ACT Policy Report

George L. Wimberly

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PREFACE

The stated mission of the ACT Office of Policy Research is to inform policy makers and the general public on important issues in education by providing timely information that can directly enhance knowledge, dialogue, and decision making. The current ACT Policy Research Agenda focuses on four specific areas:

- Developing the Applicant Pool
- Increasing Diversity in College
- Remedial Education in College
- Retention in College

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This study, *School Relationships Foster Success for African American Students,* uses data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and reflects ACT's interest in analyzing the critical issues affecting the preparation and diversity of the postsecondary applicant pool. It offers recommendations that policy makers, educators, and others can use to enhance the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Many individuals provided assistance at various stages of the study. The ACT Policy Research Advisory Panel provided both recommendations about the formulation of the study and reviews of draft manuscripts.

Richard Noeth provided considerable help in formulating the study and reviewing draft manuscripts. Susan Loomis helped formulate the study. ACT staff members Donald Carstensen, Patricia Farrant, Richard Ferguson, Julie Noble, Wayne Patience, Nancy Petersen, Rose Rennekamp, Richard Sawyer, Cynthia Schmeiser, and Ann York reviewed drafts of the manuscript, as did Carla O'Connor from the University of Michigan. Christina Aicher, Braden Rood, and Peggy Weih helped with manuscript preparation.

I am grateful for the assistance and support of the aforementioned individuals but accept sole responsibility for any errors of omission or commission.

George L. Wimberly

Executive Summary

The shift from an industrial to a service, information, and technology-based economy has dramatically increased the importance of advanced skills and credentials. Given the dynamic changes in the U.S. economy, growing competition across the global market, and increasing labor force skill requirements, postsecondary training has become a societal need. Postsecondary education is also an important aspiration for most students. The future strength of the American economy and workforce will largely depend on the postsecondary educational attainments of all Americans—regardless of gender, racial, or ethnic background.

Projections indicate that, within the next 30 years, minority people will constitute over one-third of the U.S. population. This demographic shift makes it imperative that African Americans and other minority groups obtain the educational credentials, skill sets, and knowledge needed to work productively in a rapidly changing economy. One way to support and guarantee the necessary increase of skilled personnel in the American workforce is to encourage and enable a greater number of African American and other minority students to successfully enter and complete postsecondary education and training.

Most young adults today earn a high school diploma. In 2000, over 85% of African Americans and nearly all white 25- to 29-year-olds had completed high school. African American adolescents overwhelmingly expect to earn undergraduate degrees, and many expect to complete advanced programs of study. They express a commitment to postsecondary education and perceive it as a key to gaining the knowledge and necessary skills to obtain meaningful and rewarding employment. In spite of their aspirations, African American students are not attending postsecondary institutions at the same rate as their white peers. In 2000, nearly three-quarters of white students enrolled in college following high school graduation, compared to just over half of African American students.

Many factors may help to explain the disparity that, although most African American high school students expect to attend college, fewer than would be anticipated actually make this educational transition. Schools play a major role in providing educational information, helping students take advantage of educational opportunities, and preparing students for success in postsecondary education and the workplace. Strong school relationships can increase students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recommends that every high school student have a Personal Adult Advocate to help personalize the educational experience. All students need to know that at least one adult in the school continually cares about them and their future after high school. Teachers, counselors, principals, and other school administrators can serve as Personal Adult Advocates. NASSP recommends that they work with about 20 students and follow their progress throughout high school, and that schools structure their time so students and Personal Adult Advocates can meet at least once a week. NASSP has provided a framework for fostering effective school relationships through the Personal

Adult Advocate model. This policy study builds on that concept by showing the strengths and weaknesses of African American students' school relationships, and how these relationships can affect students' educational outcomes.

This study uses data for 14,915 respondents, including 1,685 African Americans, who completed all four waves of the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which tracked students from 1988, when they were 8th graders, through 1994, when most of the students were about two years beyond high school. School relationship characteristics reflect some of the possible Personal Adult Advocate areas of influence and the resultant impact on the school environment. Outcome measures include students' educational expectations and their postsecondary participation two years beyond high school.

Roughly two-thirds of all students expected to earn at least a college degree, and just over 10% expected no education beyond high school. Students expressed the clear desire to not only complete education beyond high school but to earn college and advanced degrees that might better enable them to successfully compete in the rapidly changing U.S. labor market.

However, the findings indicate a gap between the educational expectations of African American students and their postsecondary participation two years past high school. Although most African American students (88%) expected to attend college or earn a college or advanced degree, just over half (56%) were moving toward that goal. Comparatively, 89% of white students expected to attend college or earn a college or advanced degree and 67% were actually in the process of meeting that goal.

African American and white students had different school experiences. The findings suggest that in the schools African American students attended: fewer students were on a college preparatory track; fewer students took advanced placement courses; and the college-going rates were lower than those in high schools predominantly attended by white students.

Among African Americans, three of the five school relationship characteristics had a positive effect on their educational expectations and postsecondary participation: School Personnel Expectations, Teachers Talking with Students, and School Extracurricular Participation. These three school relationship characteristics exemplify how African American students can benefit from school relationships within each one of these school contexts: their perceptions of staff postsecondary expectations, discussions with staff about academic and postsecondary issues outside of class, and participation in school-sponsored activities.

Educational expectations and postsecondary participation were higher among students who talked with their teachers and had positive feelings toward them. These interactions and positive feelings contributed to more cohesive school relationships. This finding was supported for whites, but only partially for African Americans. It is important for teachers and school personnel to recognize differences between the school culture and students' own ethnic and cultural identity. Students develop trust and respect for their teachers when their cultural identity is supported in the classroom. Conversely, social, economic, and cultural gaps between African American students and their teachers may make it difficult for students to form cohesive relationships.

Students (primarily white) who formed good school relationships had higher educational expectations and postsecondary participation. They developed the necessary bond with their teachers and school personnel to take advantage of the knowledge and experiential resources the school offered. These students may have expressed behaviors and attitudes that school personnel responded to favorably, and may also have had similar cultural experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. However, it is just as likely there may have been cultural and social gaps between other students (African Americans) and their teachers that served as obstacles to positive student-school relationships.

Study findings suggest three major recommendations for improving school relationships for African Americans (and perhaps for all students) and increasing their educational expectations and postsecondary participation. These include:

Districts should evaluate school relationship models (including NASSP's Personal Adult Advocate model), determine the essential characteristics and needs of their students, and implement a program that best fosters these important relationships and begins at least in the middle school.

The school district's implementation plan should include cultural, social, and economic diversity awareness and training components so that staff are sensitive to these potential differences and do not inadvertently allow them to become barriers to building effective relationships with students.

Schools should make available school-based and school-sponsored activities that connect students to adults in their school and encourage all students to participate in these activities.

1

Introduction

The shift from an industrial to a service, information, and technology-based economy has dramatically increased the importance of advanced skills and credentials. Given the dynamic changes in the U.S. economy, growing competition across the global market, and increasing labor force skill requirements, postsecondary training has become a societal need. Postsecondary education is also an important aspiration for most students. The future strength of the American economy and workforce will largely depend on the postsecondary educational attainments of all Americans, regardless of gender, racial, or ethnic background (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

A competitive U.S. labor market requires employees who have verbal and mathematical reasoning skills and technological competence, can work cooperatively, and are able to solve problems, make informed decisions, listen perceptively, and know how to learn (ACT, 1991, 2000; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). In fact, employers report that over the last 5–10 years, job requirements have increased (Moss & Tilly, 2001). Even entry-level jobs now require a reasonable set of technological skills, and employers expect workers to be prepared to acquire new skills as occupations evolve (ACT, 1991, 2000).

During the 1970s and 1980s many changes occurred in the labor market and labor force in many parts of the country. The demise of manufacturing jobs, for example, impacted segments of the population differentially, contributing to the economic decline of many African American and other minority communities (Jencks, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Many urban areas that African Americans migrated to after World War II for industrial jobs witnessed the disappearance of many of these employment opportunities by the early 1980s. The remaining manufacturing and entry-level jobs required skills and training that many African American job applicants lacked (Moss & Tilly, 2001).

Projections indicate that, within the next 30 years, minority people will constitute over one-third of the U.S. population. These population changes make it imperative that African American and other minority groups obtain the educational credentials, skill sets, and knowledge needed to work productively in a rapidly changing economy. One way to support and guarantee the necessary increase of skilled personnel in the American workforce is to encourage and enable a greater number of African American and other minority students to successfully enter and complete postsecondary education and training.

Education Trends

Most young adults today earn a high school diploma. In 1972, 78% of all 25- to 29-year-olds had earned a high school diploma, but graduation rates varied considerably by race: 82% of whites but only 59% of African Americans finished high school. By the 1990s, the graduation gap between whites and African Americans narrowed. In 2000, over 85% of African Americans and nearly all white 25- to 29-year-olds had completed high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

These increases in graduation rates come at a time when a high school diploma has minimal value in the labor market. In the past a high school diploma (or less) was often sufficient preparation for most entry-level jobs. Now, given technological advances, job requirements, and changing labor force needs, a high school diploma is no longer enough. Employers often expect at least some postsecondary training of job applicants (Moss & Tilly, 2001).

The earnings gap between college and high school graduates has changed in proportion to the labor and skill demands of the changing economy. In 1980 college graduates earned 19% more than those with a high school diploma. This earnings gap has steadily increased, and by 1995 college graduates earned 58% more than high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

Unemployment rates continue to be highest among African Americans with minimal education. In 1999, for example, over half of all African Americans with a high school diploma or less were unemployed, compared to 21% of whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). Even during the booming economy of the late 1990s, African Americans 16–19 years of age were nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than similar whites. However, among college graduates there was little difference between African American and white employment rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b).

Both college enrollment and college completion among African Americans have risen since the 1970s. In 1975, 10% of the college population was African American; the proportion grew to 13% by 1999. In 1977, African Americans earned 7% of bachelor's degrees conferred; the proportion grew to 9% by 1998. However, although the educational attainment of African Americans has increased overall, it still lags behind that of whites. African Americans are less likely to attend college and, once in college, less likely to complete a degree (Jacobson, Olsen, Rice, Sweetland, & Ralph, 2001). In 1993, over half of white students had earned a bachelor's degree within five years of enrollment, compared to less than one-third of African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b).

Postsecondary Education

Although today's students have numerous options for postsecondary education and training, traditional two- and four- year colleges continue to serve the majority. African American adolescents overwhelmingly expect to earn undergraduate degrees and many expect to complete advanced programs of study (Kao & Tienda, 1998; MacLeod, 1995; Morgan, 1996; O'Connor, 1999). They express a commitment to postsecondary education, perceiving it as a key to gaining the knowledge and necessary skills to obtain meaningful and rewarding employment. In spite of their aspirations, African American students are not attending postsecondary institutions at the same rate as their white peers. In 2000, nearly three-quarters of white students enrolled in college following high school graduation, compared to just over half of African American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

Many factors may help to explain the disparity that although most African American high school students expect to attend college, fewer than would be anticipated actually make this educational transition. This report focuses on a key aspect of this issue: how can our schools better help African American students move from secondary to postsecondary education? Specifically, it examines and makes recommendations about a key aspect of the explanation: the effects of institutional relationships that African American students develop with their high schools and the interpersonal relationships they develop with teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff. It concludes with policy recommendations to enhance these relationships and increase African American postsecondary participation.

Although this report focuses on African American students' needs, the elements of school relationships and policy recommendations presented can meet the needs of a broad range of high school students across the nation as all students can develop educational values, information, and opportunities from school relationships. School administrators, other educators, and policy makers can use this study's recommendations to design programs and policies that can enhance students' school relationships, increase their postsecondary participation, and better prepare them for the labor force.

2

School Relationships

One goal of our nation's school system is to help students make successful educational transitions, including the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Particularly among poor and minority students (and their families) who are not familiar with higher education, schools play a key role in preparation for postsecondary training (Epps, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Such students may heavily rely on the school to provide them with the tools and information they need to learn about educational and career options and to make successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education.

Schools can be conceived of as social systems with their own culture, goals, and rules. As an institution, the school is made up of students, teachers, administrators, and staff—all operating in a unified social setting. Students acquire educational information and use resources from the school's social structure, from peer interactions, and from the relationships they develop with teachers and other school personnel. These relationships can affect students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation by providing them with information and learning experiences, and by helping them take advantage of educational opportunities.

School relationships often play a significant role in helping students make the transition from high school to postsecondary training (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; MacLeod, 1995; McDonough, 1997). Students form relationships with their peers, teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff who work together to achieve the common goals of teaching and learning. Students' school relationships come from resources such as the curriculum, facilities, and the school's organizational structure. Students develop relationships with adults in the school through regular classroom instruction, participation in extracurricular activities, and mentoring opportunities that connect students and school personnel. In schools, students can develop relationships that can contribute to their academic development and lifelong learning orientation, and can help them move into postsecondary education.

To take optimal advantage of the educational resources and learning experiences that schools offer, students must develop cohesive relationships with their teachers, counselors, and other staff members, as well as with their school as an institution that offers an array of learning opportunities. Teachers, counselors, and other adults can provide information and experience that can help students succeed academically and socially, and make successful transitions to postsecondary training. These adults can play a mentoring role for students, help them see the importance of education, identify the talents that students have and help them to develop those talents, and mentor and guide students as they make educational and career decisions. Through classroom instruction, tutoring, extracurricular activities, and other programs, schools and school personnel can encourage students and help turn their educational aspirations into realistic and attainable goals (Grant & Sleeter, 1988; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; O'Connor, 2000). Students' school

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relationships can provide resources that function to integrate students into the school environment and help them to take advantage of the educational and social benefits that schools offer. These relationships can help to —

■ ***Develop educational norms and values.*** Schools can create an environment in which students see the importance of education as they learn the value of attending school regularly, completing assignments, and performing satisfactorily in the classroom. There is a positive relationship between teachers' expectations and student achievement (Irvine, 1990; Irvine & Irvine, 1995; Polite, 1999). Teachers' expectations can influence the type of information they convey, the opportunities they create for their students, and the values they help perpetuate. Relationships with school staff can strengthen students' educational values. Students who have cohesive relationships with school personnel value the educational process and are often committed to the school. African American students have indicated that they try to please their teachers by doing well in school (Casteel, 1997) and teacher expectations often have more influence than parents. Schools can help students develop educational and career goals, broaden their world view, and connect their present life decisions to their future goals and life success. Developing educational norms and values may be particularly important for students whose families and communities do not have direct experience with higher education and professional careers. School personnel can foster educational norms and values through general interactions with students. These values can be further expanded by taking a special interest in students and making them feel that someone in the school really does care about them and their academic progress. Schools can expose students to various careers to help them make a connection between their education and their future career goals.

■ ***Channel educational information.*** Teachers, principals, counselors, and other school staff provide students with information about academic success, postsecondary education options, and labor market requirements. Poor and minority students may especially rely on school personnel to transfer educational information because their families and communities may be unfamiliar with postsecondary programs (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Although teachers primarily instruct students in specific academic areas, along with other school staff they can be a source of information about courses needed to enter various postsecondary programs. Through various interactions with students, staff can help them learn effectively, study systematically, and perform well in the classroom. Counselors and teachers can also write letters of recommendation for students who are pursuing jobs, scholarships, and college admission (McDonough, 1997).

■ ***Expand educational opportunities.*** Schools can expose students to areas in which their families and communities may lack knowledge and resources, and can encourage students to take programs of study and academic courses to prepare them for the challenges of postsecondary education. They may also provide students with the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities that contribute to their academic and social development. Schools can help students seek out and take advantage of opportunities that facilitate access to postsecondary education, such as learning about and applying for grants and scholarships. Many social programs are also channeled through schools to

create opportunities to help poor and minority students succeed (Jencks, 1993). Programs such as Upward Bound and Title I help economically disadvantaged students gain academic skills and take advantage of opportunities beyond high school (McElroy & Armesto, 1999; McLure & Child, 1998; Myers & Schirm, 1999). These programs also enable students to form relationships with adults that can enhance school experiences, enrich academic skills, and help them consider postsecondary options.

Personal Adult Advocate

Part of the high school's role is to create an environment in which students can obtain knowledge and experiences that help them explore, plan, and transition into postsecondary training. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recommends that every high school student have a Personal Adult Advocate to help personalize their educational experience (1996, 2002). All students need to know that at least one adult in the school continually cares about them and their future after high school. These advocates can be teachers, counselors, principals, or other school staff members who are committed to mentoring and guiding students.

Personal Adult Advocates develop relationships with students to ensure that they are well integrated into the school and engaged in the school experience. Personal Adult Advocates who can relate to individual students and understand the challenges each student faces are important in setting the tone and creating a sense of school community (NASSP, 2002). They help foster a school climate in which students are free to learn and can easily access school resources. They can facilitate students' relationships with other adults and students in the school—including identifying problems that should be taken up with counselors, mediating conflicts with teachers and students, and visiting the student's home. When this model is successfully operating, no student should feel isolated in school. The Personal Adult Advocate can serve as a buffer to help students navigate through high school and prepare for postsecondary education and future careers. Such a role is supported by a recent study (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002) that reported the efficacy of an "interested adult" as a key factor in the college planning of African American and Hispanic high school seniors.

Teachers, principals, counselors, school administrators, and other adults in the school can serve as Personal Adult Advocates. NASSP recommends that they work with about 20 students and follow their progress throughout high school, and that schools structure their time so that students and Advocates can meet at least once a week (1996, 2002).

NASSP has provided a framework for fostering effective school relationships through the Personal Adult Advocate model. This study builds on that concept by showing the strengths and weaknesses of African American students' school relationships, and how these relationships can affect students' educational outcomes. It shows how selected school relationship characteristics affect students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation and describes how school relationships can potentially support educational norms and values, channel educational information, and expand students' educational opportunities.

3

National Data

Selected responses from each of the four survey waves of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) were used to examine the effect of students' school relationships on their educational expectations and postsecondary participation. NELS has tracked 1988 8th graders through 1994, when most students were about two years beyond high school. This study examined the NELS national sample of 14,915 students, including 1,685 African Americans, who completed all four NELS data collection activities. Data from the 1994 NELS follow-up survey captured students' postsecondary and early adult experiences.

School Relationship Characteristics

Table 1 describes the school relationship characteristics that were constructed from NELS surveys using factor analysis techniques (Wimberly, 2000). These characteristics represent clusters of items that measure how school relationships contributed to students' school experiences and provided the learning and experiential resources that affected their educational outcomes. They reflect some of the possible Personal Adult Advocate areas of influence and the resultant impact on the school environment.

Table 1

Description of School Relationship Characteristics

Characteristics	Description
School's Academic Emphasis	Percent of students in college preparatory track, taking advanced placement courses, and who go on to two- and four-year colleges.
School Personnel Expectations	Students' perceptions of what their counselor, favorite teacher, and coach want them to do after high school.
Students' Feelings Toward Teachers	How students feel about their teachers and the general school climate.
Teachers Talking with Students	Teachers' indications about how often they discuss academic, career, and college issues with students outside of regular classroom instruction.
School Extracurricular Participation	Student participation in various school-sponsored activities such as athletic teams, academic clubs, and social organizations.

Outcome Measures

The outcome measures focused on students' educational expectations and their postsecondary participation in 1994, two years beyond high school. Educational expectations were measured by questions that asked students how far in school they expected to go.

Educational attainment was measured by postsecondary participation. Students were placed in two categories:

- ***Postsecondary participation:*** Students who had ever enrolled in a college, university, or postsecondary program with the intent of pursuing an associate's degree, bachelor's degree, certificate, or some type of specialized training.

- ***No postsecondary involvement:*** Students who had never enrolled in any type of postsecondary institution, and who have been working full-time or part-time, been in the military, or been out of the labor force.

4

FINDINGS

Students often rely on their school relationships to help them develop educational goals and make the transition from high school to postsecondary education and future careers. This is particularly true for African American students whose families and communities may simply lack the necessary information and educational resources to help them get to college (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Personal Adult Advocates or other concerned people or programs can help students navigate the school terrain and can promote strong school relationships. This section discusses how each of the NELS school relationship characteristics affected the educational expectations and postsecondary participation of African American and white students.

Educational Outcome Differences

There was little variation between educational expectations for African American and white students. Figure 1 shows that roughly two-thirds of all students expected to earn at least a college degree and just over 10% expected no education beyond high school. The findings suggest that students expressed the clear desire to not only complete education beyond high school but to earn college and advanced degrees that might better enable them to successfully compete in the rapidly changing U.S. labor market.

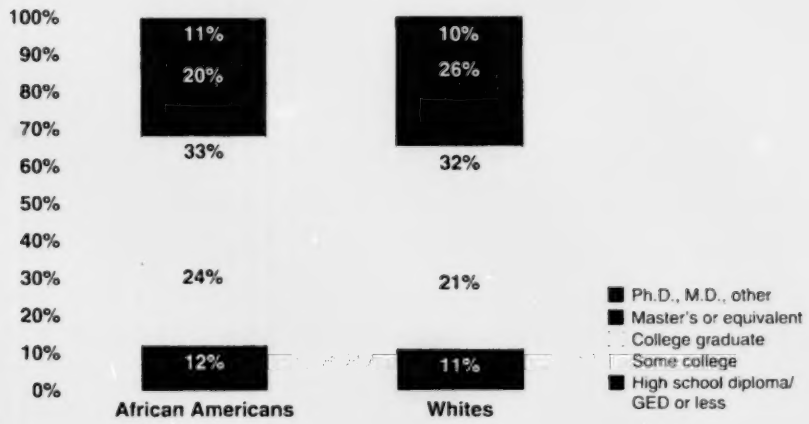

Figure 1: How far students expected to go in school

Unlike the similarity found for educational expectations, the data reveal substantial differences in African American and white students' postsecondary status two years beyond high school. Figure 2 shows that 67% of white students had begun their postsecondary education, whereas only 56% of African American students had pursued any postsecondary education two

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years past high school. The findings indicate a gap between the educational expectations of African American students and their postsecondary participation two years past high school. Although most African American students (88%) expected to attend college or earn a college or advanced degree, just over half (56%) were moving toward that goal. By comparison, 89% of white students expected to attend college or earn a college or advanced degree and 67% were actually in the process of meeting that goal.

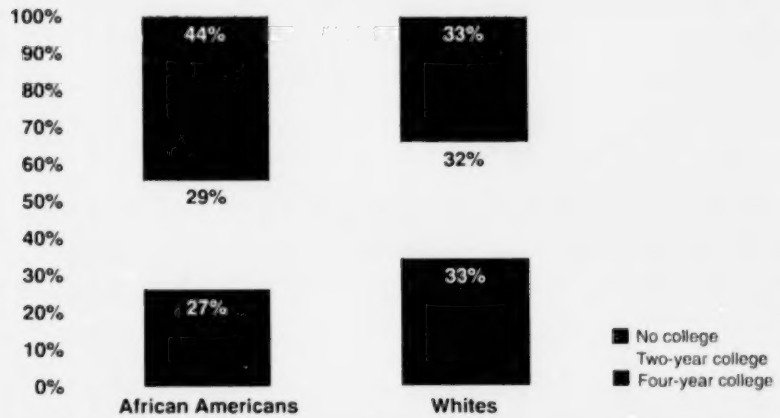

Figure 2: How far in school students were two years beyond high school

School Relationship Differences

African American students' school relationships differ from those of white students. These differences may partially explain why African Americans have lower rates of postsecondary attendance than whites, despite similarities in their educational expectations. Table 2 shows that African Americans differed significantly from whites in two NELS areas: School's Academic Emphasis and Teachers Talking with Students.

These findings suggest that at the high schools African Americans attended —

- Fewer students were on a college preparatory track.
- Fewer students took advanced placement courses.
- The college-going rates were lower than those in high schools predominantly attended by white students.

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Table 2

Differences in School Relationship Characteristics

School's Academic Emphasis	X
School Personnel Expectations	
Students' Feelings Toward Teachers	
Teachers Talking with Students	X
School Extracurricular Participation	

X = statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between African American and white students

These findings were not surprising, since college-going rates overall are lower among African American students. Particularly in urban communities, African American students may be concentrated in racially homogeneous, low-income schools with limited academic and social resources (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Wilson, 1987). African American students are often on a general or vocational/technical track in high school that does not provide rigorous academic classes to prepare students for college or other postsecondary education (Lucas, 1999; Oakes & Wells, 1996). Advanced placement classes, college preparatory classes, and academic enrichment programs are often unavailable to African American students, particularly those in low-income communities (Lippman et al., 1996).

African American students were also less likely than whites to talk with their teachers outside of class. Because teachers provide information and opportunities that enhance students' educational experiences, direct student-teacher interaction may compensate for a school's potentially lower academic emphasis and may propel students to postsecondary education. Particularly among African American students in low-income and urban communities, school personnel may be the primary source of postsecondary and career planning information (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These students' families and communities may lack the information and resources to help them succeed in school and make the transition to postsecondary education. Schools can potentially provide this educational information through Personal Adult Advocates who work to ensure that teachers and students communicate regularly outside of the classroom, thereby helping to strengthen students' school relationships.

How do school relationships explain African American students' educational outcomes?

Though African American and white students overwhelmingly expected to earn college degrees (Figure 1), white students significantly exceeded African Americans in actual postsecondary participation (Figure 2). School relationships had less of an effect on African American students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation than they did on those of white students. Table 3 shows that each of the school relationship characteristics had a positive and statistically significant effect on white students' educational expectations and postsecondary attendance. Although each of the school relationship characteristics was positive for African Americans, the effect was statistically significant for only three of the five school relationship characteristics: School Personnel Expectations, Teachers Talking with Students, and School Extracurricular Participation. These three school relationship characteristics exemplify how African American students can benefit from their school relationships within each one of these school contexts: their perceptions of staff postsecondary expectations, discussions with staff about academic and postsecondary issues outside of class, and participation in school-sponsored activities.

Table 3

How Do School Relationships Differentially Affect Students' Educational Outcomes?

	Educational Expectations		Postsecondary Participation	
	African Americans	Whites	African Americans	Whites
School's Academic Emphasis		X		X
School Personnel Expectations	X	X	X	X
Students' Feelings Toward Teachers		X		X
Teachers Talking with Students	X	X	X	X
School Extracurricular Participation	X	X	X	X

X = statistically significant effect ($p < .05$)

School's Academic Emphasis and Students' Feelings Toward Teachers minimally related to African American students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation. Table 3 shows that these measures did not have a statistically significant effect on their educational outcomes, which may help explain why African Americans were not pursuing postsecondary education at a similar rate as whites. African Americans attended high schools with a lower academic emphasis (Table 2)—where fewer students took college preparatory and advanced placement classes or pursued postsecondary education or training. Students' Feelings Toward Teachers were not impacting African American educational outcomes as they did for whites, implying that African Americans were not forming strong interpersonal relationships with school staff (as were white students) that could propel them toward postsecondary education. This finding suggests that African American students and their teachers may have marginal relationships. For example, previous studies show that many African Americans, particularly boys, tend to have a high incidence of behavior and discipline problems in school (Irvine, 1990; Irvine & Irvine, 1995). African American students possibly relied on other school relationship characteristics, such as involvement in extracurricular activities, to foster their educational expectations and outcomes.

The school can be fertile ground for developing relationships that influence students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation. The findings suggest that school relationships can be developed and shaped in many ways and across numerous opportunities to enhance educational expectations and increase postsecondary participation among all students. Study results clearly suggest that we can manipulate school relationship factors to facilitate educational growth and change for all students.

5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Skills and credentials acquired through postsecondary education and training have become increasingly important to compete in the service, information, and technology-based U.S. economy. As high school graduation has become nearly universal, students generally expect to attend college and earn degrees. However, there is a clear gap between African American and white students' postsecondary participation. The findings suggest that African American students attend schools with fewer students being prepared for the rigors of college or other postsecondary training. African American students are often overrepresented in racially homogenous, low-income schools with limited academic and social resources (Lippman et al., 1996). Although schools appear to help African Americans develop educational goals and expectations, these students often do not have access to the information, curriculum, and opportunities that can propel them to postsecondary education.

School relationships can help explain why African American students are less likely to pursue postsecondary education than their white peers, despite the similarity in their educational goals. Study findings show that African American and white students both benefit from strong school relationships; however, African Americans are not developing the types of school relationships to the same extent as white students that can enhance their educational expectations and increase their postsecondary participation. Teachers, counselors, and other school staff who take on the Personal Adult Advocate role can help close the gap between students' educational expectations and postsecondary participation. Adults who encourage students, monitor academic progress and social development, and have a general interest in students' futures can turn educational expectations into realistic goals (Grant & Sleeter, 1988; Hrabowski et al., 1998; O'Connor, 2000). School relationships are one area that education policies, programs, and practices can change to support education outcomes for all students. The key question is: How can school relationships be systemically strengthened to better serve all students and produce young adults who are prepared for lifelong learning and competing in the U.S. labor market?

This study shows educational expectations and postsecondary participation were higher among students who talked with their teachers and had positive feelings toward them. These interactions and positive feelings contributed to more cohesive school relationships. If student relationships with teachers and other staff members are to enhance educational outcomes, they must be based on trust, mutual respect, and a sense of obligation (Coleman, 1988, 1994; Wimberly, 2000). Through such positive relationships, students can learn more effectively and can more fully experience the numerous resources available from their schools. This finding was supported for whites, but only partially for African Americans, which suggests that African Americans are not forming relationships with school staff that can support educational values, channel educational information, and help them take advantage of educational opportunities.

It is important for teachers and school personnel to recognize differences between the school culture and students' own ethnic and cultural identities. Students develop trust and respect for their teachers when their cultural identity is supported in the classroom. Conversely, social, economic, and cultural gaps between African American students and their teachers may make it difficult for students to form cohesive relationships (Murrell, 1999).

Students (primarily white) who formed good school relationships had higher educational expectations and postsecondary participation. They developed the necessary bond with their teachers and school personnel to take advantage of the knowledge and experiential resources the school offered. These students may have expressed behaviors and attitudes that school personnel responded to favorably, and may also have had similar cultural experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. However, it is just as likely there may have been cultural and social gaps between other students (African Americans) and their teachers that served as obstacles to positive student-school relationships.

Recommendations

The school relationship issues that are discussed in this report can apply to all students, not just African Americans. Clearly, our nation's schools serve an extremely broad range of racial, ethnic, social, and economic groups. Results of this study suggest that school relationships can play an important role in education by revealing how the relationships African American students have with their school and with their teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff can increase their educational expectations and postsecondary participation. The importance of these relationships, and the strong reliance by African American students on the school and its resources for educational and career planning support, is reflected in other studies as well (Epps, 1995; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Study findings suggest three major recommendations for improving school relationships for African Americans and increasing their educational expectations and postsecondary enrollment.

- ***Districts should evaluate school relationship models (including NASSP's Personal Adult Advocate model), determine the essential characteristics and needs of their students, and implement a program that best fosters these important relationships and begins at least in the middle school.***

One school relationship model does not fit all students and all schools. Schools should develop models that best fit the essential needs and characteristics of their students. Individual schools should carefully decide how to best build these relationships. Students bring to school various academic and social resources that reflect their families, communities, and experiences. These

resources play an important role in how students develop relationships with teachers, counselors, and other school staff. Schools must recognize these differences, determine students' needs, and implement models that best fit these needs.

Students need to know that school staff members care about them and their futures. They need to know that an interested adult (e.g., their Personal Adult Advocate) is available to them and is one who understands their concerns, continually helps them consider and explore educational and career goals, and wants to help them pursue their education and career objectives. Study results show that when students perceive high expectations from their teachers and school personnel, both their own expectations and the odds they will pursue postsecondary education increase.

African American students care what school personnel want for them (Casteel, 1997) and need to know that their teachers, counselors, and other school staff care about them and their futures. Given what we know about the tendency for African American students to rely on their schools for postsecondary information and support, Personal Adult Advocates might play this role early in a student's academic career, supporting and encouraging postsecondary exploration beginning in middle school, reinforcing these activities as students move through the educational system, and continually nurturing and helping students develop their postsecondary plans. It is important to note that Personal Adult Advocates are not meant to replace the essential roles of other school personnel (e.g., the role of the counselor in educational and career planning). Rather, their function is to augment and support these roles, so students can take optimal advantage of all aspects of the school's resources and environment.

A range of structured activities can help define the implementation of the Personal Adult Advocate role. For example, Advocates might systematically meet with their assigned students (NASSP recommends weekly meetings) to monitor academic progress and social development. They can serve as mentors and advisors, helping students navigate the educational process, explore future options, and achieve postsecondary goals. They can act as sponsors for students, assist students in dealing with school bureaucracies, and serve as further school-based links to students' families.

- ***The school district's implementation plan should include cultural, social, and economic diversity awareness and training components so that staff are sensitive to these potential differences and do not inadvertently allow them to become barriers to building effective relationships with students.***

Formal, structured professional development activities—as well as informal groups and projects that emphasize cultural, social, and economic diversity—can be implemented in nonthreatening ways to help teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff to better understand the elements of racial differences and diversity. Because school staff need to know how to form effective relationships with students from various backgrounds, this topic should be one of the major training and awareness aspects of the successful implementation of a school relationship model.

Schools should systematically work to understand and be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds and needs of their students and families. Schools should work to recruit minority teachers, counselors, coaches, school administrators, and staff who may be familiar with a range of students' cultures and lifestyles. All school personnel should participate in diversity training to relate better to minority students and their families. This study shows that the relationship between African American students and their schools is not as strong as it is for white students. Schools need to systematically take the initiative to improve these relationships by responding to cultural norms and student values, while encouraging universal academic achievement and postsecondary training. Schools can develop curricula and programs that continually take into account these cultural differences and work toward academic success for all students. Schools can periodically implement activities that celebrate students' culture and heritage. For example, African American history and cultural experiences can be implemented beyond Black History Month and integrated into the curriculum.

- ***Schools should make available school-based and school-sponsored activities that connect students to adults in their school and encourage all students to participate in these activities.***

The National Federation of State High School Associations supports extracurricular activities for all students. Such activities promote citizenship and sportsmanship, instill a sense of school and community pride, teach lessons of teamwork and self-discipline, and facilitate the physical and emotional development of adolescents (Youniss & Yates, 1997). They can also provide platforms upon which students can build helpful and supportive school relationships.

Students' relationships with their school and with the staff members in the school can be cultivated and reinforced through participation in extracurricular activities, special projects, and joint school-community programs. Such activities bring students together with adults outside of the regular classroom. Schools should make systematic efforts to create programs, projects, and activities in which students can participate and which afford them opportunities to foster relationships with various school staff members. To accommodate students who have after-school obligations such as jobs or family commitments, some extracurricular activities can take place before school, during lunch periods, or in special activity periods set aside during the school day as well as after school.

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